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# Breaking the Silence: Preservice Teachers Use Reflective Journals to Express Personal Experiences Related to Diversity

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Breaking the Silence  
Preservice Teachers Use Reflective Journals to Express  
Personal Experiences Relating to Diversity

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Introduction

Demographics in the United States are constantly changing. This is most evident in our large, urban, public school classrooms. Teacher Education programs have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers to be highly competent and socially conscious teachers who are capable of teaching in urban school communities (Ukpokodu, 2007). In an attempt to better prepare preservice teachers, most teacher education programs have implemented some type of multicultural teacher education course and/or experience (Garmon, 2010). These courses/experiences must be more than appreciation courses. Students must be able to examine their experiences and their perceptions in order to gain an understanding and need for culturally responsive practices.

When I stepped on the campus as a newly appointed junior faculty in a teacher education program, I was charged with teaching a diversity perspectives course for early childhood educators. Diversity Perspectives in Early Childhood Education was a required course for preservice teachers in the Early Childhood Education program at that time (the program has since changed). The preservice teachers typically took the course a

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semester or two before their student teaching experience. The course was designed to introduce preservice teachers to the concepts of power, race, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, ability, sexual orientation and other aspects of diversity. Diversity Perspectives was a hybrid course, made up of lectures, large and small group discussions, group work, online discussions and group evaluations of case studies. Recognizing a strong need for the content, I was excited to teach the course. I believed the diversity content was critical for preservice teachers who were about to venture into the classroom as new student teachers. I hadn't anticipated the challenges that I experienced teaching the diversity course.

### Background: The Challenge

While each teacher of color has their own unique teaching experiences, teachers who are seen as others by their students often face multiple obstacles in the classrooms (Vargas, 1999). Frequently, faculty of color are responsible for teaching diversity courses or diversity infused courses, and serious costs are often associated with teaching those courses (Brayboy, 2003). Teaching a course that incorporates dissident material is an extra challenge for any professor especially for a professor of color teaching predominantly white students. The diversity courses are often seen as unnecessary or they are minimized as part of the faculty of color's teaching load (Brayboy, 2003). In addition, the often-challenging issues of race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and abilities may pose a challenge to some in that setting. While each teacher of color has their own unique teaching experiences, teachers who are seen as others by their students often face multiple obstacles in the classrooms (Vargas, 1999). While there are difficulties teaching the diversity course, the work is crucial. Achieving quality education for all children depends on preparing teachers to develop the necessary skills and dispositions to work with students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (Ukpokodu, 2002). As the proportion and number of children of color in the nation's schools steadily increases, so does the need for teachers with a multicultural awareness and understanding (Moule, 2005).

Generally, my classes are heavy with discussion and lots of self-reflection on the part of the preservice teachers and myself. Connections are made between the content and the personal experiences of the preservice teachers. However, with the diversity course, unlike the other courses I taught that same semester, preservice teachers initially seemed to be reluctant to join the group discussions and equally less interested in sharing personal experiences and opinions on tough topics of power, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. When the preservice teachers did

participate in class discussions, many of their responses seemed to be politically correct—generic responses while other preservice teachers questioned the need for a diversity course at all. What could account for the difference between the classes? How could preservice teachers be encouraged to self-reflect and participate in open dialogue around challenging issues of diversity.

### ***Preservice Teacher's Responses to Diversity Course***

Garmon (2010) discusses that disposition is one of the key factors associated with changing preservice teacher's attitudes about diversity. As a part of disposition, student self-awareness and self-reflectiveness play a key part in their ability to relate and critically analyze issues of diversity. A classroom climate must be created that would encourage all students to bring their authentic selves in an effort to begin a dialogue about difficult issues in a safe and welcoming environment (Garner, 2008). Self-awareness and self-reflection is important not only for the students, but for the instructors as well (Garner, 2008). If students aren't willing to be open and engage in dialogue and self-examination in the diversity course, class discussion and self-reflection may suffer.

Teaching a diversity course can have its challenges, especially when the professor is one of color and the students are predominantly White. If not careful, teaching a diversity course can escalate students' defensiveness and negative dispositions, which can ultimately serve to defeat the purpose of the multicultural class for the preservice teachers (Ukpokodu, 2002).

The challenge of teaching a diversity course, as a professor of color, can be manifested in many ways. Microaggressions and student silence are two ways in which students have shown their disdain in a diversity course taught by a faculty of color. In a diversity course, there is a tendency for White students to diminish or disrespect the faculty of color and thereby the message (Moule, 2005). This disrespect can manifest in regular small aggressions. These microaggressions can become regular occurrences surrounding a diversity class. Frequent aggressions may be small, but over a period of time may have a cumulative effect on faculty and their psyches and over time may become too much for the faculty to bear (Brayboy, 2003).

Students can also challenge the diversity course through classroom silence (Ladson-Billings, 1996). Student classroom silence can make self-awareness and self-reflection on issues of diversity difficult. Student silence can mean many things. In a course that relies on sharing and self-evaluation, silence can stunt individual student and group growth. Gloria Ladson-Billings addresses student silence in her 1996 article

“Silence as Weapons: Challenges of a Black Professor Teaching White Students.” Ladson-Billings (1996) outlines various reasons for student silence and her role in creating the silences in her courses. According to her student silence can be an indication of oppression, and it can be used as a weapon—a means of resistance. She went on to illustrate ways teachers can probe and explore student silences through varied teaching strategies; small groups, journal writing, drama, role-playing, and simulation (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

It is instrumental in the teaching of a course of this nature, to examine ones own beliefs, biases, and values. There is a need for faculty to allow preservice teachers to feel comfortable enough to self-explore with the purpose of learning and growing. With the existing silence, this self-analysis and reflection was missing from many of the preservice teachers’ experiences in the diversity course. With the goal of leading a more effective classroom and preparing preservice teachers to learn from self-reflection, I asked myself, how can I get preservice teachers to move past the silence and explore their thoughts, ideas, and experiences as they relate to diversity?

### ***Reflective Journaling***

In previous teaching experiences in the K-12 public school arena, I have always understood the value of journaling as an instructional tool. Issues in teaching and learning that have been commonly viewed as significant in K-12 programs are more rapidly being recognized in higher education programs (Jarvis, 2001). In Jarvis’ 2001 examination on journal writing in higher education, he recognized that the use of journals is not as widely accepted in higher education classes. Time was one factor limiting journaling that was explored in Jarvis’ work. More recently, faculty have begun to adopt reflective journaling, and blogging in the higher education classroom. While often used for reflection purposes, journaling can be a teaching, learning, and research tool used in higher education classrooms (Jarvis, 2001).

O’Connel and Dymont (2006) report that faculty use journals for a wide range of reasons. Among the many reasons that faculty use journals was that they suggest that journals provide students with an opportunity to have more freedom in expressing themselves and reflect upon their personal growth and development (O’Connel & Dymont, 2006).

Cisero (2006) investigated whether reflective journal writing can improve course performance. Her research suggests that the writing helped the average student more than the high achieving (they would probably do well without the journals) and the low achieving students. Reflective journal writing can only be successful if students are will-

ing to take an active part in the learning process (Cisero, 2006). Cisero noted that reflective journal writing can be used across all disciplines and teacher education majors like the journals so much they planned on using them in teaching.

Understanding the current literature on the topic and recognizing the challenge in my diversity classroom, I was eager to try a strategy that would encourage self-thought and reflection.

### Incorporating Change

At the end of the first semester teaching Diversity Perspectives, I reflected on the course and wondered if there was a way to engage the preservice teachers in reflective thought where they felt comfortable enough to reflect on their experiences. Their silence in the course seemed as if they were afraid of saying something “wrong” or something that was not considered to be “politically correct.” Their silence also seemed to be in opposition to the topic of diversity.

Teacher educators have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers to work effectively with a diverse student population. How can I begin to guide preservice teachers toward culturally responsive teaching if they are unable to examine their own beliefs and experiences surrounding diversity? I worried, if the preservice teachers are unable to engage in conversations around topics of diversity, how will diverse topics be handled once the preservice teachers enter the classroom as teachers? Could using journals to reflect get preservice teachers to move beyond general thought and into more personal thoughts on topics of diversity? If the preservice teachers utilized journals, what stories would they share? These are questions I had as I began to think about making changes in the Diversity Perspectives course.

It is necessary for multicultural teacher education instructors to learn what students experiences and conceptions are so that they can devise a way to effectively challenge them (Garmon, 2005). I believed that journals could aid in this. The following semester, reflective journals were implemented in the diversity course with the hope that the journals would encourage the students to reflect on personal experiences as they related to diversity. Where they felt uncomfortable sharing aloud; would they be comfortable reflecting in journals?

#### *The Start*

Early in the 2nd semester of teaching this course, journals were distributed to the preservice teachers. The class consisted of 31 females and one male. Of the 32 students 30 were White non-Hispanic and two

were Black non-Hispanic. The students enrolled in the course were Early Childhood Education majors. The course was offered once a week. Most students were in their junior or senior year preparing to begin student teaching within the next semester or the year.

The preservice teachers were instructed to use the journals to record thoughts and experiences as well as insights as they related to class topics. They were directed to write an entry at the end of each class. Time was left at the end of class for a few minutes of free writing. The following class, the preservice teachers were encouraged to share their thoughts from the previous week in small groups with an opportunity for large group feedback at the end of the small group sharing. The journals were ungraded; they were being used as a learning and reflection tool for the pre-service teachers with the hope that they would feel comfortable sharing experiences around topics that some find challenging. The preservice teachers understood that the journals would be collected at the end of the semester.

### ***Weekly Writing***

Once the writing began, challenges emerged. Initially, the preservice teachers seemed uncomfortable with the writing and some expressed that they were unsure of how to get started. Some asked for a specific prompt to be written on the board. For the students that needed a topic, they were reminded to simply reflect on the class topic and/or reading of the day and make personal connections to the topic. Another issue was grading. With the journals being ungraded, the preservice teachers were unable to let go of the idea of getting grades and/or points for each activity. They were reminded that this was a self-reflection activity aimed at personal growth and development. In her research on journals, Cisero (2006) found that some students found journals to be busy work, a nuisance and unnecessary while others found the journals to be effective and helpful. It was noted that there were mixed reactions to the weekly writings.

### **Reflections from Preservice Teachers Personal Stories**

A Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was used to analyze the data because it was identified as an effective way to review qualitative data. With the use of journal writing, a Thematic Content Analysis was most relevant because it allows the researcher to take the objective stance; it allows interpretations to be kept at a minimum (Anderson, 2007). According to Anderson (2007), “the Thematic Content Analysis is the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures and in some way

informs all qualitative methods” (p. 1). When conducting a Thematic Content Analysis, every attempt was made to identify names of themes that emerge from the actual words of participants. In analyzing the journals the preservice teacher’s direct words were key.

Of the 32, 24 journals were read and analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis. The remaining journals were unavailable for analysis. There were eight separate journal entries—representing eight different weeks in the course (some of the weeks were used for group presentations and other activities that weren’t reflected in the journaling experience).

The journals were read allowing common themes to emerge. How did the pre-service teachers use the reflection journals? Did the preservice teachers use the journals to reflect on personal experiences? What common themes emerged? To begin the analysis, first, the names on the journals were covered up to protect the identity of the preservice teachers. Next, the journals were numbered for identification purposes. First, the journals were read over once. The journals were read again categorizing common themes as they emerged from the writing. Each entry seemed to fall under one of two major themes: (1) writings that focused on a review or summary of class content, and (2) writings that shared personal stories. The entries were marked as such.

Since the purpose of the journals was to get preservice teachers to become comfortable with sharing personal experiences, these entries were the focus of further exploration. With a focus on the personal stories, the journals were read again. In the personal stories shared, four themes emerged. A different color highlighter was used to identify each one of the four types of personal stories. Table 1. describes the common themes that emerged from the journaling.

### ***Summaries and Opinions of the Class Topic***

Of the 24 journals, all of the journals had one or more entry in which the day’s topic was simply described and/or opinions were given about

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**Table 1**  
***Common Themes in Journal Entries***

Focused on Class Discussion:

- (1) Gave a general summary and/or description of the day’s topic.
- (2) Gave an opinion on the day’s topic.

Personal Experiences Shared:

- (1) Self identified as being a part of a historically marginalized group.
- (2) Identified family and/or friends as being part of a historically marginalized group.
- (3) Witnessed others being stereotyped and/or marginalized.
- (4) Described general stories of diversity.

the day's topic. Much of the journaling seemed to be a review of what was said in class or opinions of the topics. This type of writing seemed to reflect the type of surface conversations that were taking place in class. My interest was whether students felt comfortable moving beyond the surface and the general comments and really examined their thoughts and experiences on diversity demonstrated through their journaling self-reflective stories. Below are samples of those types of entries.

### ***Personal Experiences***

Some of the preservice teachers used the journals to share personal experiences. These reflections were more than what the students had been willing to share aloud. Samples of the students writing are included below. Of the 24 journals examined, 22 of the preservice teachers shared one or more personal stories that related to diversity. The personal stories seemed to fall under four specific categories. Below are the categories and samples of the preservice teachers writings.

**Self-identified as being a member of a diverse group and/or have been stereotyped.** The first type of personal stories that were shared were self-identified personal stories where the pre-service teacher felt that because of a particular element about themselves—they self-identified as being a member of a diverse group—they felt they stood out from the typical.

#13 - "In high school, the classes were divided up by college prep, honors, and AP. I was always in the college prep courses. I did not mind being in these classes because the other ones were too hard for me."

#14 - "As an Italian from New Jersey, I always get people who think I'm from the mob . . . Plus, besides being in the mob, I must love pasta, wine, and red sauce. I know these stereotypes aren't as offensive as other stereotypes, but it does get old and annoying."

#21 - "In my life time I have encountered many stereotypes. I have been stereotyped because of the color of my skin. One key memory that sticks out in my mind is being followed in many stores. I was actually escorted out of a store before and told not to come back because the manager said I stole from the store on a previous day."

#20 - "Being openly gay in high school, I wasn't ridiculed very much. Surprisingly, I was accepted. I even became the president of my school's Gay-Straight Alliance. I believe that my openness actually helped me through high school because I was able to be myself without feeling bad."

**Family and/or friend identified as a member of a diverse group and experience around it.** The second theme that stood out

while analyzing the journals was pre-service teachers who shared stories identifying someone close to them as being a member of a diverse group. Here are examples of preservice teachers writings that fell in this category.

#1 - "I know my younger brother was diagnosed with a learning disability and he struggled academically and behaviorally throughout elementary and middle school. . . my brother has now graduated from Univ. of Delaware . . . I think he is a prime example of how important it is to give students quality attention and let them know you have great expectations of them."

#9 - "My senior year in high school a classmate of mine came out. From that point on there was nothing but controversy. He would get into fights (verbal) with teachers in religion class and led a petition when he was not allowed to bring another boy to prom."

#15 - "I have a very good friend who is gay. He came out his junior year of high school. My fiancé is his bet friend and was since 9th grade. It was really scary for him to come out, but a lot of people treat him well—one one said anything mean."

**Shared examples of stereotype and/or discrimination they've witnessed happening to other people or participated in.** The third theme that stood out was where preservice teachers discussed discrimination that they've witnessed.

#18 - "Growing up, being called "gay" was a regular insult. I didn't realize how much it can hurt a person until I got a little bit older. It is a very sensitive subject, especially at the high/middle school ages because it was the time when students were finding themselves."

#6 - "The movie Crash reminded me of a time I was 14 walking down the street with my older friend. We weren't in the best neighborhood and an African American man with headphones was walking down towards us and she moved us to the other side of the pavement. I said why are you pushing me over and she said we need to be careful of our surroundings. I think back now—that man probably noticed an felt bad that we moved because of him."

#17 - "When I think the stereotypes, I think of my mom's stereotypes. I've always tried to get her to think differently or in a new way, other than her preconceived notions. She is a loving, caring, and beautiful woman but sometimes what she said doesn't match that. I have tried (not) to let her negative thoughts influence how I've acted."

#22 - "I feel as though linguistic diversity can be a very touch subject. If you think about it, nobody is offended or annoyed by individuals that have a southern accent, a NY accent, or a Pittsburgh accent, but people are extremely judgmental when it comes to individuals speaking in

Black English/Ebonics. I was one of those people who became annoyed because it is not “proper” and my opinion was that it sounds uneducated . . . This course on diversity was the first class I have ever taken and the only place I ever heard Ebonics defined as Black Vernacular English and be recognized as something other than incorrect.”

**Shared general issues of diversity they’ve experienced.** The last category the entries fell into was general issues of diversity. These writings varied in their content. The students shared stories that they experienced.

#18 - “For my preschool field experience class, I am placed at a Head Start Center . . . My first day there was a little bit shocking. But as I work with these children, I started to love it more and more. The school is primarily African American and Hispanic in a very low-income area. It was different from anything I’ve ever seen . . . It is great to see these kids succeed in school when so much around them is such a problem and they are so at risk.”

#19 - “My first real encounter with diversity happened this semester in my preschool field class. I was placed in a Head Start Program . . . Many of the students speak Spanish and know no English. I have never taken a Spanish class so I was extremely overwhelmed and frustrated. After working with the students for a few weeks, I began to feel more comfortable and find ways to communicate with the Spanish-speaking students. It was a very rewarding experience.”

#24 - “We all know the ‘N’ word is very offensive word to those in the African American culture, and I too find it to be that way. What I don’t understand is the word ‘nigga.’ How is this different from its original form? I see it on campus all the time, African American call each other ‘niggas’ and sometimes even the ‘N’ word. Now what I don’t get is why? They say that word is a racial slur, so why do they use it?”

### Insights

This research is a vital contribution to the existing research on faculty of color, preservice teachers, and reflection in the diversity course. With this being a persisting challenge more research is needed on the topic. More increasingly, teacher education programs will need to offer diversity courses to their preservice teachers as an aim at preparing teachers for a multicultural society. Teaching a course of this nature can prove challenging to any instructor, and even more challenging to a faculty of color. While this can be challenging, having a multicultural experience is likely to touch some preservice teachers and make a difference in their lives (Ukpokodu, 2002). Teaching a diversity course as an African American professor can pose a challenge when it comes to engaging preservice teach-

ers in open dialogue about difficult topics of race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and ability. While the challenge can exist for any professor, it can be particularly challenging when the professor is identified as an “other”. There needs to be a way to encourage students to begin to think about and reflect on their experiences as they relate to diversity if the students are to grow and learn.

According to Garmon (2010), when examining the effectiveness and impact of Multicultural Teacher Education courses, dispositional factors such as openness, self-awareness/self-reflection and commitment to social justice can determine a multicultural teacher education course’s ability to effectively impact a preservice teachers attitude and beliefs about diversity. The use of journals for reflection purposes is one tool that can be used to give pre-service teachers an additional opportunity to reflect on and share personal experiences without the audience of the whole class. With this project, most pre-service teachers used the journals to make personal connections on the topics of diversity discussed in class. The personal experiences the students wrote about fell into four categories; self-identification, identified families and/or friends as diverse, examples of stereotypes and/or discrimination, and general discussion of diversity.

The journals seemed to reflect that students were able to share and reflect on personal experiences they had with issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and abilities in a way that they weren’t able and/or willing to do in whole class discussions. Of the four personal story categories, most entries fell under the stereotypes and/or discrimination categories. Preservice teachers were willing to share stories of race and discrimination they’ve witnessed or that they actually perpetuated. Some of the personal stories depicted shame (self and/or family holding stereotypical ideas), which may have added to the classroom silence. Many of the stories were ones that I did not hear during class discussion. With one of the focuses of this class being to allow and encourage self-reflection, the journals seemed to provide an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to do that.

While the journals did offer preservice teachers an outlet to express themselves in place of the silence, reflective journaling did pose challenges. Many preservice teachers were not ready to give up the idea of receiving a grade for each “assignment.” Additionally, some preservice teachers struggled with “*not knowing what to write*” and wanting a “*writing prompt*.” Finally, after collecting journals at the end of the semester, I found questions and/or comments that I wished I could have addressed during the semester. Although the preservice teachers did have a chance to ask questions and/or make comments, some did not. They were able to write them down, but the teachable moment passed. Another challenge

to this research was the idea that the students were aware that the journals were to be collected at the end of the semester, some still may have kept responses generic based on the fact that they would be read by a faculty of color (myself). Following guidelines for the instructional use of reflective journals would help faculty who may come across concerns students have about the use of reflective journaling in higher education. Hubbs and Brand (2005) outline guidelines that can help with the use of reflective journals in the college classroom.

Despite the challenges, reflective journaling was useful in providing an outlet and jumpstarting small group and large group discussions. The preservice teachers seemed more willing to share what they had already thought about and written down. Somehow that seemed to provide a level of comfort. The journals gave the preservice teachers a safe space to reflect on challenging topics from their personal perspectives. This is one of the first steps toward becoming culturally aware teachers.

### Moving Forward

In more recent courses, some of the reflection and sharing has moved to an online discussion forum. With the addition of these online forums, reflective journaling seems to be more visible in the higher education setting.

When preparing preservice teachers for today's diverse classroom, self-reflection becomes a crucial component of cultural sensitivity. Getting students to reflect on their personal experiences with diversity, cultural biases and fears is often the first step in creating culturally responsive teachers. This can be a challenge, especially when the instructor is one of color. Using journals for reflection on issues of diversity is one tool to get preservice teachers to self-reflect with the purpose of growing more culturally aware.

When discussing the issue of diversity, the discussions can be strained—especially when the professor is identified as an “other.” People generally are unsure of how to move forward and begin open dialogue. Being fearful of saying the wrong things, preservice teachers sometimes opt to say nothing at all—or they say what they think they should say. Also, some may use silence as a way of showing opposition to the topic and/or the professor. Also, preservice teachers may not want to reveal personal stories that may identify them as being a part of a diverse group. Allowing students to reflect in journals without fear of a whole class audience may give some students the opportunity to take risks and share their feelings, which in turn can assist self-acknowledgement, growth, and learning surrounding issues and experiences of diversity.

While journaling can be a successful tool for moving past silence, professors should be aware of some minor problems that may arise. Future research will take a look at the online journaling format and its impact on preservice teacher's self-reflections on issues of diversity and the faculty of color's role on preservice teacher silence.

Teacher education programs must not shy away from beginning difficult conversations on topics of diversity. As we send preservice teachers into classrooms they must be able to reflect on their own thoughts and ideas surrounding difference. Journaling is just one way to begin to move preservice teachers in the direction self-reflection and understanding with the intent on moving toward a culturally responsive understanding in the classroom.

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